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AUTHOR Page, Jane A.; Page, Fred M., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine views of administrators, school board members, teachers, parents, and children as they relate to the increased emphasis on testing children in the early grades. Survey instruments were developed with questions focusing on six areas of concern: (1) changing purposes of kindergarten and early childhood programs; (2) children's readiness for tasks demanded by testing; (3) problems related to increased student stress and negative attitudes; (4) time devoted to testing and related activities; (5) curriculum changes resulting from tests, and (6) teacher stress and lack of autonomy. The surveys were distributed to subjects residing in a 17-county area in southeast Georgia. Frequency tabulations indicated that the various groups of subjects share many concerns related to the increased emphasis on testing. Teachers, administrators, and board members were similar in clearly identifying negative associations with testing. Parents and children were consistent in their portrayal of negative test characteristics. (Author/RH)

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# Increased Emphasis on Testing and Test Preparatory Activities in the Early Grades

Jane A. Page
Associate Professor
Department of Elementary Education with Special Education
Georgia Southern College
Statesboro, Georgia

Fred M. Page, Jr.
Associate Professor
Department of Professional Laboratory Experiences
Georgia Southern College
Statesboro, Georgia

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Running head: INCREASED EMPHASIS ON TESTING

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine views of administrators, school board members, teachers, parents and children as they relate to the increased emphasis on testing of children in the early grades. Survey instruments were developed with questions focusing on six areas of concern: (1) changing purposes of kindergarten and early childhood programs, (2) children's readiness for tasks demanded by testing, (3) problems related to increased student stress and negative attitudes, (4) time devoted to testing and related activities, (5) curriculum changes resulting from tests, and (6) teacher stress and lack of autonomy. The surveys were distributed, Spring 1986, to subjects residing in a 17 county area in Southeast Georgia. Frequency tabulations indicate that the various groups of subjects share many concerns related to the increased emphasis on testing. Based on the results, the authors identify conclusions and implications for further research and educational improvement.

Introduction and Rationale

Education, a responsibility of individual states, has been commanding national attention. A NATION AT RISK: THE IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM (1983) warned of "... the rising tide of mediocrity..." in American education. The claim is not without substance.

> ...while many students can read with literal comprehension, 28 percent cannot; 51 percent cannot write letters, and 79 percent cannot write a persuasive statement. Further, the overall performance in higher order thinking skills such as inference, analysis, interpretation, and problem solving declined in the '70's, especially among the most able students (Jones, 1986).

Politicians, business leaders and other lay citizenry have become involved with, and in many cases responsible for, designs to improve education. A "quick fix" has been demanded by many reformers. Test scores, tangible, understandable elements, have risen to prominence as the criteria by which reform should be measured. Testing demands have increased with little discussion by "test happy" individuals concerning negative implications. Greg Andrig (1985), President of the Educational Testing Service, was even more candid in his assessment. He suggested that the

current national mania for testing has resulted in a situation where "...if it moves, test it..." has become an operational principle. Perrone (1981) echoed the view:

> Reflecting a belief in the power of science to improve school practice, many educators, school board members and state legislators prefer to err on the side of too much rather than too little testing.

The importance of test scores has led to an emphasis on product rather than process in many areas of education. According to Short (1986):

> The so-called right answer has more meaning to the modern educational program than whether the child understands the process in achieving the correct response.

Concern related to the testing emphasis has been expressed throughout the nation. Educators of young children have been especially apprehensive about the increased preparation for and utilization of standardized tests. Is this apprehension valid? Do others involved with the education of children share these concerns? These questions and the background presented provide the rationale for this study.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine views of administrators, school board members, teachers, parents and children as they relate to the increased emphasis on testing of children in the early grades.

## Methods and Procedures

Related to the issue of testing young children, four survey instruments were developed. Target populations for these instruments were: administrators, school board members, teachers, and parents. Questions on the instruments focused on six areas of concern.

1. Changing purposes of kindergarten and early childhood programs;
2. Children's readiness for tasks demanded by testing;
3. Problems related to increased student stress and negative attitudes;
4. Time devoted to testing and related activities;
5. Curricula changes resulting from tests; and
6. Teacher stress and lack of autonomy.

A fifth instrument was developed to determine children's views toward school and tests.

The surveys were distributed, Spring 1986, to subjects residing in a 17 county area in southeast Georgia. Usable instruments were completed by 21 administrators, 17 school board members, 77 parents, 71 teachers and 358 children. Frequency tabulations were calculated and analyzed for each subset of subjects.

Findings

Frequency tabulations indicated that administrators, school board members, teachers, and parents share many concerns related to the increased emphasis on testing. One item included on each survey was "The increased emphasis on testing and activities preparing children for testing causes many children to feel frustrated and inadequate." Sixty-eight percent of the parents agreed with the statement, as did 71% of the school board members, 85% of the administrators, and 86% of the teachers. A second item on the survey was, "Time devoted to testing and preparatory activities takes away important instructional time." Sixty-three percent of the school board members agreed, along with 68% of the parents, 80% of the administrators, and 88% of the teachers. Another item on the survey was "Tests, rather than children's needs, determine curriculum content and activities." Sixty-three

percent of the school board members agreed, as did 68% of the parents, 79% of the teachers, and 80% of the administrators.

Children were questioned to determine their views of tests and school. Responses of children in kindergarten and first grade were significantly more positive than children in higher grade levels.

Information related to items that were specific for each subgroup were also important. Some findings of interest are listed below:

1. While 63% of parents surveyed think that children should be provided with some type of formal reading and writing instruction in kindergarten, 95% think play is an important part of learning.

2. When asked if grade level promotions should rely on state-mandated tests, 93% of the teachers responded "no."

3. Teachers surveyed felt that approximately 21% of instructional time is lost due to preparation for state-mandated tests.

4. A large majority of administrators (87%) indicated that they receive more negative feedback than positive from teachers related to state-mandated tests.

5. Less than half (47%) of school board members felt that school systems will improve because of increased testing requirements included in Georgia's Quality Basic Education Act. Specific findings for various subgroups are identified on Tables I - IV.

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Insert Tables I - IV about here

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Implications

Through the years, the element of testing has been a standard component of education. Its primary role has focused on the provision of qualitative measures. The current status of testing, however, is one of transition. No longer is its role confined to measuring. Rather, the emphasis on evaluating children is resulting in tests very significantly affecting pedagogical process.

How is testing perceived by those close to it? According to this study, the practitioners (teachers), as well as the decision makers (administrators and board members), are very similar in clearly identifying negative associations with testing. Others involved in the scheme of testing, parents and children, are consistent in their portrayal of negative test characteristics.

With such agreement on negativism, why is there a testing dilema? Underlying reasons could be many in number. Perhaps, though, the ultimate factor is that many decisions for education are formulated by those whose expertise is founded on opinion rather than training. In all likelihood, the decision making process will go unaltered. However, it is possible that decisions can be affected by providing decision makers with appropriate data. The general public's cry can be influenced and legislator's attention seized by the provision of sufficient, timely information. The teachable moment is a critical instructional element. Teaching and instruction are not confined to the target population of children. There are others, siginificant others, in our citizery who are in urgent need of instruction on the falacies, as well as advantages of testing.

The study on which this paper is based is limited in its construct, as well as in the surveyed population. Yet, these findings, along with a review of related literature, unequivocally sound the alarm for caution and further study on the issue of testing children. There are two alternatives: We will immediately address this significant element and alter its current path; or, such studies will be slow in developing and testing will continue to determine the path of education.

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Table I

Administrators' Perceptions of the Increased Emphasis on Testing

Key:

SA=Strongly Agree: A=Agree: D=Disagree: SD=Strongly Disagree

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 1. The original purpose of kindergarten and early childhood programs has been lost. | 15 | 25 | 55 | 5 |
| 2. Children are often required to perform tasks for which they are not developmentally ready. | 15 | 50 | 35 | 0 |
| 3. The increased emphasis on testing and activities preparing children for testing causes many children to feel frustrated and inadequate. | 19 | 62 | 14 | 5 |
| 4. Time devoted to testing and preparatory activities diminishes important instructional time. | 10 | 70 | 20 | 0 |
| 5. Tests, rather than children's needs, determine curriculum content and activities. | 10 | 70 | 20 | 0 |

table continues

Increased Emphasis

12

Percentages[a]

| | SA | A | D | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. Teachers of young children have decreased flexibility and professional autonomy. This leads to frustration and burn-out. Teachers' negative attitudes influence the children they teach. | 10 | 55 | 35 | 0 |

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 7. Are the state-mandated tests used to group children according to their "ability levels?" | 63 | 37 |

| | POS | NEG |
|---|---|---|
| 8. Do you receive more positive or negative feedback from teachers about state-mandated tests? | 13 | 87 |

[a]N = 21

Table II

School Board Members' Perceptions of the Increased Emphasis on Testing

Key:

SA=Strongly Agree: A=Agree: D=Disagree: SD=Strongly Disagree

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 1. The original purpose of kindergarten and early childhood programs has been lost. | 0 | 31 | 50 | 19 |
| 2. Children are often required to perform tasks for which they are not developmentally ready. | 0 | 59 | 35 | 6 |
| 3. The increased emphasis on testing and activities preparing children for testing causes many children to feel frustrated and inadequate. | 6 | 65 | 29 | 0 |
| 4. Time devoted to testing and preparatory activities diminishes important instructional time. | 19 | 44 | 37 | 0 |
| 5. Tests, rather than children's needs, are now determining curriculum content and activities. | 0 | 63 | 25 | 12 |

table continues

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 6. Teachers of young children have decreased flexibility and professional autonomy. This leads to frustration and burn-out. Teachers' negative attitudes influence the children they teach. | 19 | 44 | 31 | 6 |
| 7. School systems will improve because of increased testing requirements included in the Quality Basic Education Act. | 6 | 41 | 47 | 6 |

[a]N = 17

Table III

Parents' Perceptions of the Increased Emphasis on Testing

Key:

SA=Strongly Agree: A=Agree: D=Disagree: SD=Strongly Disagree

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 1. The original purpose of kindergarten and early childhood programs has been lost. | 18 | 22 | 44 | 16 |
| 2. Children are often required to perform tasks for which they are not developmentally ready. | 25 | 35 | 36 | 4 |
| 3. The increased emphasis on testing and activities preparing children for testing causes many children to feel frustrated and inadequate. | 23 | 45 | 27 | 5 |
| 4. Time devoted to testing and preparatory activities diminishes important instructional time. | 23 | 45 | 27 | 5 |
| 5. Tests, rather than children's needs, determine curriculum content and activities. | 32 | 45 | 21 | 2 |

table continues

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 6. Teachers of young children have decreased flexibility and professional autonomy. This leads to frustration and burn-out. Teachers' negative attitudes influence the children they teach. | 24 | 35 | 32 | 9 |
| | YES | | NO | |
| 7. Do you think children in kindergarten should have formal reading and writing instruction? | 63 | | 37 | |
| 8. Do you think play is an important part of learning? | 95 | | 5 | |

[a]N=77

Table IV

Teachers' Perceptions of the Increased Emphasis on Testing in the Kindergarten and Primary Grades

Key:

SA=Strongly Agree: A=Agree: D=Disagree: SD=Strongly Disagree

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 1. The original purpose of kindergarten and early childhood programs has been lost. | 15 | 52 | 24 | 9 |
| 2. Children are often required to perform tasks for which they are not developmentally ready. | 46 | 41 | 10 | 3 |
| 3. The increased emphasis on testing and activities preparing children for testing causes many children to feel frustrated and inadequate. | 45 | 41 | 10 | 4 |
| 4. Time devoted to testing and preparatory activities diminishes important instructional time. | 45 | 43 | 8 | 4 |
| 5. Tests, rather than children's needs, determine curriculum content and activities. | 44 | 35 | 14 | 7 |

table continues

18

| | Percentages[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SA | A | D | SD |
| 6. Teachers of young children have decreased flexibility and professional autonomy. This leeds to frustration and burn-out. Teachers' negative attitudes influence the children they teach. | 30 | 51 | 10 | 9 |

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| 7. Do you feel that your creativity is stifled because of the mandatory demands of your school system's curriculum requirements? | 56 | 44 |
| 8. Do you feel that promotions to the next grade level should rely on state-mandated tests? | 7 | 93 |
| 9. Do you feel that the social, physical, and emotional needs of children are suffering due to the increased academic emphasis? | 67 | 33 |

10. What percentage of instruction time do you feel is lost due to preparation for state mandated tests? Mean = 21%

[a]N = 71